Online counselling reaches a new group of employees

Some people would rather log onto the Web than lie down on the couch



BY CEDRIC M. SPEYER

There is a Zen master who receives pilgrims for spiritual counselling in his hut at the top of a mountain. At the bottom of the mountain is another cabin, where seekers have to do 3,000 ritual prostrations before making the climb for an in-person session.

Upon being asked why he makes it so difficult for disciples to see him, the master simply replied that when people finally arrive, they want to get right to the point.

Communicators in the 21st century have come to expect instant access, if not instant gratification in the process of "connecting" with each other. Much of the counselling that is being done is to address the dreaded feeling of being disconnected, on whatever level.

Communication is not just something we do; it is also something which defines us. The medium is not only the message — it is part of us. In short, forms of communication shape our development, for better or for worse.

This partly explains why the advent of a new form of communication creates such a stir. Certainly e-mail, not to mention its Internet parent, has had a profound impact on all kinds of relationships: social, business, romantic, and now therapeutic. EAP programs themselves brought about a radical shift in the perception of psychological help, removing it that much further from Freud's couch.

The arrival of online counselling is again recasting the counselling relationship from both the practitioner and the client's point of view.

And online counselling has arrived. In the spring of 1996, there were 12 online therapy Web sites. Now there are more than 200 Web sites where at least twice that many counsellors and therapists offer legitimate online, interactive services. There are "online clinics" running group practices which guarantee the best online security available. And credential screening procedures ensure clinicians are professionally qualified and accredited. There are independent consumer guides, "Best Practices" literature is already in place, and the "International Society for Mental Health Online" has established a provisional code of ethics.

All of this has parallels in the EAP industry, which has the huge advantage of individual clients not having to pay a fee for service, as they do through most existing e-therapy Web sites.

Now that online counselling is being offered by EAP providers, EASNA (Employee Assistance Society of North America) is addressing ethics and best practices. Since the perception of the general public lags behind the pioneers in any innovation, many people are unaware of the products that are being put in place by well-established EAP consultants, and what their value is for companies and employees. Here is a brief summary of current online options.

•One-question consultation — There are plenty of mental health information resources on the Web sites of large EAP providers; but now professional counsellors can respond to e-mailed questions with individualized information or suggestions either privately or in a bulletin board format. The latter could be characterized as the Ann Landers or Frasier Crane of the Internet.

Clients who may not have overcome the natural resistance to consulting a professional before, can now do so from the privacy of their own computer.

They can be as impersonal or personal in their approach as they choose. This provides an invaluable consulting context for those who would not otherwise benefit from EAP services, with little extra cost to the employer.

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•Ongoing e-counselling — This allows for letter-based, short-term therapeutic relationship. Research has shown that the main healing factor in counselling is the "therapeutic alliance" irrespective of any methods or techniques the counsellor uses. It is the relationship that heals, and this form of online counselling offers a viable one.

Since in this format, the counsellor and client are not online at the same time, the time and space restrictions of traditional counselling sessions are superceded by a text-based relationship.

Many clients find it is like keeping a journal of thoughts and feelings, the difference being a trained professional is reading and responding to them. Although it is not a substitute for traditional therapy, there are many clients who prefer this format for the privacy, the convenience of anytime/anywhere access, and even the comfort and safety of not being seen, which many find liberating. This form can virtually eliminate the embarrassment that keeps many potential clients from using EAP services.

•Ongoing private chat — This is the online equivalent of an in-person session with relatively spontaneous interaction, depending on typing speeds and the response time on both sides. The convenience of keeping virtual appointments or having easy access to a counsellor makes this an attractive option. It also can be an easier step to make than booking an in-person session. However, with 24-hour/seven-day telephone contact available, it may be redundant for EAP providers to staff "real-time" e-counsellors unless improvements in videoconferencing, coinciding with public acceptance, make chats a real substitute for traditional sessions. Virtual appointments are also relatively easy to walk away from, so one concern is that the rate of cancellations could be high. We will see what the future will bring to "live" one-on-one counselling.

•Periodic public chat rooms — Live public exchanges are one of the most popular features of the Internet in general. In the context of EAP, they allow professional development seminars, workplace issue workshops, and employee education to continue online.

Debriefing, feedback, brainstorming, discussion groups, and peer support can take place anonymously when employees log-on to scheduled chat sessions on relevant topics and themes. Consider such focus groups as "Gossip: where to draw the line?" or "The hide and seek of committee meetings" in a forum where employees can speak freely, being identified only by their anonymous login name. Besides live discussions, each theme can be the topic of ongoing bulletin board conferences, with employees free to read and post messages at their convenience.

The application of the chat room format to human resource management opens up new possibilities. For instance, while some organizations have embraced and implemented employee debriefing after traumatic events, the vast majority of employers have not. Live group forums provide a viable alternative, in a safe, structured setting where employees can be mutually supportive. There is also some built-in distance from the natural resistance and inhibition characterizing in-person group sessions. Without the pressure of being on the hot seat when speaking, online discussions flow more freely.

The question of billing for online services has been addressed by EAP providers in different ways as the service options themselves have evolved. Some providers charge a designated amount for each of their e-services. Others include e-services within their overall project fees plus a nominal subscription fee to establish employee access.

Quality of communication takes time; if not time for 3,000 prostrations, then time to reflect and digest, to process thoughts and feelings, and to look at our reactions as well as those we trigger in others. We instinctively search for the best way of expressing crucial points of view. Sometimes that happens when we are alone in a room, when we have time and when it occurs to us out of the blue.

Sometimes issues take shape when we find the words to "say it." That's the beauty of online counselling — it's open for business at those moments.

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